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NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

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**AN IMPOSSIBLE GOAL FOR DIFFICULT TIMES:  
DEMOCRATIZATION AND THE CLINTON NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY**

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Strategy is “the calculated relation of ends and means”<sup>1</sup> Desired ends are those intended to ensure a “safer, more prosperous America”<sup>2</sup> and that can be achieved by means available to the nation Thus, the ultimate objective of any national security strategy is to correctly balance security against the cost of achieving it John Lewis Gaddis restates this dilemma best “you will want to do everything possible to minimize the risk of defeat, or humiliation, or embarrassment, but you will also want to minimize the costs of doing so, lest you destroy what you are trying to defend in the process”<sup>3</sup> Using this rationale, the optimal national security objective is one that promotes security at an affordable cost

A nation’s assumptions about its domestic and international environments affect how it views and defines its security interests, objectives, and priorities Nowhere is this observation more relevant than in the Clinton Administration’s 1997 national security strategy Entitled “A National Security Strategy for a New Century,” this document envisions today’s world as a fertile field in which the seeds of democracy can be sown among nations previously within the former Soviet Union’s sphere of influence or below the United States’ Cold War threshold of concern Promotion of democracy is one of our nation’s core national security objectives because its authors assume that democracies are “less likely to wage war” to achieve their aims<sup>4</sup> and that establishing them will be easier in the wake of the Soviet Union’s demise In other words, Americans will be safer in a world of democratic nations than one in which non-democracies exist Although this may appeal to an idealistic American public, this paper asks whether it is an optimal national security goal For reasons that follow, the answer is no

### WHY ISN’T DEMOCRATIZATION AN OPTIMAL NATIONAL SECURITY GOAL?

First, world democratization is not *achievable*—at least not under current circumstances and certainly not within the United States’ and its allies’ resource constraints Thomas

Carothers, in his article, "Democracy Without Illusions," suggests democratization is much easier said than done. In the past twenty years, many nations in which democratic governments have been installed—some with U.S. assistance—have either fallen back into authoritarianism or suffered human rights setbacks democracy also was supposed to eliminate.<sup>5</sup> Other developing countries, like Singapore and Malaysia, consider a "strong hand" necessary for development. Whether this is simply an excuse for elites to remain in power or a legitimate recipe for democracy in some parts of the world is unclear. What is clear, at least to Carothers, is that the United States cannot assume responsibility for democracy's success or failure around the world because, with only a few exceptions, we do not have the economic and political resources necessary to have a major impact on the political course of other countries.<sup>6</sup>

In his article, "The Clash of Civilizations," Samuel Huntington offers one reason why democratization may be so difficult in some parts of the world—it is foreign to many cultures.<sup>7</sup> He does not go so far as to suggest that some cultures are intrinsically incapable of becoming democratic, however, he argues that democratic or not, differences among cultures will inevitably lead to conflict. In one striking example—the Arab world—he argues that the principal beneficiaries of Western democracy have been anti-Western Islamist movements.<sup>8</sup>

Although Richard Rubenstein and Jarle Crocker dispute Huntington's thesis that conflict among civilizations is inevitable, they share his doubt that democracy is a panacea for all the world's ills.<sup>9</sup> They argue that satisfying basic human needs is the key to avoiding conflict. In some countries, democracy may satisfy a population's need for self-determination. However, people suffering even more basic deprivations are unlikely to be satisfied only by democracy. This idea is the basis for the United States' approach to China. In his defense of the Clinton Administration's democratization agenda, Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott

acknowledged that “continued economic and cultural engagement is the best way to induce democratization ”<sup>10</sup> It is clear, then, that democratization in some corners of the world is not achievable without considerable preparation—preparation that will require substantial U S investment in the target countries Is that investment within our reach? Some say no

Second, even if democracy is universally *achievable*, Huntington’s suggestions that it may not be enough to pacify some nations and that it might expose the United States to even greater security risks beg the question whether democracy is universally *desirable* In addition to his example of anti-Western forces rising to power in democratic Arab states, the most notorious example of democracy gone wrong was Adolf Hitler’s election as Chancellor of Germany in 1934 These and other rare but instructive cases suggest one other aspect of democracy that our national security strategy appears not to have considered another nation’s democratic majority agenda might be completely hostile to our national security interests In pre-World War II Germany’s case, Hitler fomented hatred towards minorities and the victorious powers of World War I by blaming them for Germany’s desperate post-war poverty He was thus ultimately able to shake the bonds of the Treaty of Versailles, rearm Germany, and invade his neighbors Will similar security risks await the United States with the ascendancy of anti-West majorities in the Middle East?

#### IS THERE A BETTER OBJECTIVE THAN WORLD DEMOCRATIZATION AND IS THERE A BETTER WAY TO ACHIEVE IT?

Despite these rare cases where democracy might be contrary to our national security interests, it can fairly be said that democracy is ultimately preferable to authoritarian rule After all, the Administration asserted that democracies are “*less* inclined,” not *never* inclined to commit aggression These are exceptional cases Nevertheless, the facts that exceptional cases do exist and that universal democracy is unlikely to be achieved within our resources and in the

current world environment lead to the questions whether better objectives or approaches exist  
The answer to both is yes

Our national security strategy suggests a better objective when it describes our goal in China “the emergence of a politically stable, economically open and secure China *Our focus will be on integrating China into the market-based world economic system*”<sup>11</sup> This goal is achievable because it simply builds on the momentum already propelling China toward full membership in the world economy, it is achievable for other countries as we seek to expand our markets in the context of our second national security objective, “promoting prosperity”

Our corresponding hope that China’s government will thus become more “politically stable,” correctly elevates this fundamental concern above our desire to establish a particular form of government It recognizes that political stability, not necessarily democracy, will make China less of a security threat to the United States It also conforms with Carothers’ theory that economic prosperity is a precursor to democracy and Rubenstein’s and Crocker’s view that true security can be achieved only when people’s basic needs are met If we are concerned about reducing the likelihood of aggression in the post-Cold War world, our immediate objective ought to be economic globalization—meeting the basic needs of disadvantaged peoples for whom democracy would otherwise be a way to forcefully narrow the disparity between the haves and have nots

The approach we take toward economic globalization and, ultimately, political stability is also critical to both our success and its affordability The current national security strategy seeks to promote democracy worldwide without regard to priority Thus, we appear to view the democratization of African nations to be as important as the democratization of China In other words, we want an ideal world Unfortunately, given our nation’s resource constraints and the

dire circumstances facing many countries today, especially those in Africa,<sup>12</sup> this goal is simply unrealistic. Even if we let the world economy do most of the work, some nations will be left behind. How, then, do we apply our limited resources to maximize world economic and political stability?

George Kennan confronted the same question at the beginning of the Cold War when the United States felt its only hope against communism was to fundamentally restructure the world order by maximizing self-determination.<sup>13</sup> His answer was that this “universalism” must give way to a “particularist” approach in which our national security goals are prioritized according to our interests and resources. His priority—one the U.S. ultimately adopted—was the restoration of the balance of power in Europe and Asia. Rather than responding to every act of Soviet hegemony, Kennan argued that securing this “heartland” would most effectively defend the world against Soviet domination. That goal was ultimately achieved by reconstructing Germany and Japan. Today, faced with the same limited resources and need to maximize their effectiveness, we must again establish priorities. It is toward particularly critical nations that our primary economic globalization and political stabilization efforts must be directed.

## CONCLUSION

Our current national security strategy is an ambitious—some would say overly ambitious—program. As we downsize forces and cut budgets, its military and diplomatic demands will strain our nation’s capabilities. To make our strategy affordable, we must make it more realistic. Rather than focusing on universal democracy, as we did after World War II, we should consider George Kennan’s wisdom. We must moderate and prioritize our goals by promoting not only our prosperity, but also the prosperity of certain nations whose unsatisfied basic needs will otherwise propel them toward a collision with the United States.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, "Containment and the Logic of Strategy," *The National Interest* 10 (1987-88) 29

<sup>2</sup> A National Security Strategy for a New Century (Washington, D C The White House, May 1997) 1

<sup>3</sup> Gaddis, "Containment and the Logic of Strategy," 30

<sup>4</sup> A National Security Strategy for a New Century, 2

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Carothers, "Democracy Without Illusions," *Foreign Affairs* 76, (1997) 33-44

<sup>6</sup> Carothers, "Democracy Without Illusions," 94

<sup>7</sup> Samuel P Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 72 (1993) 22-49

<sup>8</sup> Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," 32

<sup>9</sup> Richard E Rubenstein and Jarle Crocker, "Challenging Hunting-on," *Foreign Affairs* 96 (1994) 113-128

<sup>10</sup> Strobe Talbott, "Democracy and the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs* 75 (1996) 57

<sup>11</sup> A National Security Strategy for a New Century," 16

<sup>12</sup> Robert D Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," *The Atlantic Monthly*, (February 1994), 44-76

<sup>13</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (New York Oxford Univ Press, 1982), 56